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### **INVESTING IN PEOPLE**

(Health)

#### **Resurgence of Davao Norte's malaria cases alarms officials**

By Frinston Lim

Mindanao Bureau

**(Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer News Online – 4/20/08)**

TAGUM CITY, Philippines--Health officials have recorded a sharp increase in malaria cases in Davao del Norte's two remote towns populated by indigenous communities, with the number rising by over 300 percent in a year.

According to figures from the Davao del Norte provincial health office (PHO) based in Carmen town, malaria cases jumped to 593 in 2007, compared to just 154 in 2006.

Dr. Agapito Hornido, provincial health officer, said in a recent interview that the marked increase in malaria cases were monitored in barangay (villages) in Kapalong and Talaingod, towns with mountainous villages and having large populations of indigenous people (lumad).

"From these two municipalities we monitored at least 400 malaria incidents or about 80 percent (of the jump)," Hornido said.

The jump in 2007 was not the first time Davao del Norte had to grapple with malaria. In 2004, 741 cases were recorded, including some deaths, necessitating aid from the World Health Organization to prevent an epidemic.

Hornido said surveys by local health officials uncovered the resurgence of malaria, which was previously not monitored due to the remoteness of the areas.

But he assured the public that "the provincial government is focused" on treating malaria-stricken residents while intensifying efforts at informing and educating Ata-Manobo villagers, the lumad in these areas, on how to avoid malaria.

The health official said worst-hit was Gupitan village in Kapalong town, a mountain-community that shared boundaries with Bukidnon province.

"Health services seldom reach the community, which is a three day's trek from the town proper," Hornido said, adding the village's isolation and its residents' beliefs influenced their "lukewarm reception" to health missions by government health workers.

"Our health workers have a hard time teaching them (lumad) about the disease, its prevention, its cure. They still hold on to their beliefs that malaria comes from food or from leaves of strange trees," he said.

To address this concern, Hornido said his office enlisted lumad with basic education and trained them to become health workers for their communities, particularly in Gupitan. These lumad health workers were the ones who conducted lectures and information drives to their kalumunans (co-villagers) using a common language they all understood.

"Their efforts are paying off," Hornido said of the lumad health workers in Gupitan.

With an improved road, transportation by single motorcycles is already common in the area. "Health missions from government and private groups are reaching the village at a faster rate and the people are already more receptive to proper, scientific approach at fighting the disease," said Hornido.

He said elsewhere in the province, the PHO also intensified its strategies against the disease.

The health official said several strategies have been used in the campaign, which included distribution of treated mosquito nets, retrieval of old mosquito nets and spraying.

Records from the PHO revealed Davao del Norte had 741 malaria cases in 2004, which was the highest in the last five years and reports of several deaths in Gupitan spurred intervention from the United Nations' World Health Organization and other "partners" before the upsurge of cases was halted and a malaria epidemic prevented.

Still, Hornido said one patient died of malaria complications in Gupitan in 2007, showing the persistence of the disease, despite efforts of provincial and local health officials.

Aside from the WHO, the province also received assistance in its anti-malaria campaign from foreign donors like the Global Fund Malaria Component of the Tropical Disease Foundation and the United States Assistance for International Development (USAID).

Malaria is an infectious disease caused by protozoan parasites which are transmitted by female mosquitoes. The disease is widespread in tropical and sub-tropical regions of the world, including Asia.

Aside from Kapalong and Talaingod, other areas affected in the 2007 "malaria season" were Sto. Tomas and San Isidro towns and Panabo City.